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INTERVIEWEE: LES COPAN

INTERVIEWER: HARVEY SCHWARTZ

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[00:00:00] **HARVEY SCHWARTZ:** This is Harvey Schwartz, and I'm in Vancouver, British Columbia. Today is the 14th of September 2014. This is part of the Pacific Coast Pensioners Association ILWU Oral History Project. I'm with Les Copan. Les, it's spelled C-O-P-A-N?

[00:00:30] **LES COPAN:** Right.

[00:00:31] **HARVEY:** Can you tell me when were you born and where you were born?

[00:00:35] **LES:** I was born in Victoria, British Columbia on July 22, 1926.

[00:00:47] **HARVEY:** Where were your parents from? What country did they come from?

[00:00:51] **LES:** My father was born in the Ukraine. He was brought to Canada at two years of age in 1899. My mother was born in Arbroath, Scotland. She came to Canada—she was 18—around 1921. One of those things that happened. They were married on March 17, 1924. ‘Course, they told us kids for years that they were married in 1923. For obvious reasons!

[00:01:44] **HARVEY:** Sure. Now what did your dad do for work?

[00:01:49] **LES:** He was a laborer. He grew up on a wheat farm in Saskatchewan, and he went overseas with the army in the First World War. He was fortunate; when he was a child, he lost the first two joints of these two fingers. And so, he couldn’t pull the trigger of a rifle. He was in the headquarters branch. When he came back to Canada, he applied and he became postmaster in Insinger, Saskatchewan. He joined the Naval Reserve, and they came out to Victoria for their annual training. He did what sailors do. And so, he resigned from the post office and came out and married my mother. He was working in construction, and he was in Oregon. One day the immigration [agent] came and said to my mother, “You’re illegal here. Back to Canada.” So they came back to Canada. My brother was born in Oregon. And we grew up [in Canada] .

One of the warts in my life is that we moved to Vancouver in 1935. My father was a scab in that lengthy strike. As they say, don’t blame the son for the father’s transgressions.

[00:04:00] **HARVEY:** Of course! Well, what did your dad tell you about the strike? You were about ten years old at the time. You were a youngster.

[00:04:09] **LES:** I remember the machine guns on the docks and so on. But he never talked about it. My younger brother married the daughter of a longshoreman. Now, her father scabbed in ‘35. In the ‘23 strike, his job was to sit in the field across from the president of the union’s home with a rifle.

[00:04:53] **HARVEY:** Jeez. What was he supposed to do with the rifle? Was he supposed to take a shot at him? Or was he just supposed to watch him, or what was he supposed to do?

[00:04:58] **LES:** If anybody came after him, they would have shot them. He would have shot them in those days. Anybody that came after the president, you see. He was protecting the president of the union.

[00:05:12] **HARVEY:** Ok. In ‘23?

[00:05:14] **LES:** Yes. Then we come to 1935. He had a wife and child. And you think of the pressure that must be on them. People like he and my father and many others. You can’t condone it, but you can understand it.

[00:05:41] **HARVEY:** Now, what pressure do you mean? You mean the pressure of the Depression?

[00:05:46] **LES:** Yes, there’s no other work. So, if they went out on strike and got blackballed, they had a problem. Even as late as 1966, I was fighting to get some of these guys’ time reinstated. And we were successful in it.

[00:06:12] **HARVEY:** You’re talking about guys who scabbed in ‘35?

[00:06:15] **LES:** That were blacklisted. Yes.

[00:06:16] **HARVEY:** Yes. I thought I remembered there was an effort to kind of forgive and—if not forget, forgive—in 1959, when the Canadian area was consolidated. After they won the ‘58 strike. Everyone was going to get pensions. Are you saying that wasn’t quite the case at that time?

[00:06:40] **LES:** No, it did change. There was nothing officially said. But times change, you see. By ‘58, I had five years on the waterfront. I walked the picket lines in that ‘58 strike.

[00:07:07] **HARVEY:** Right. Let me roll you back a little bit to your youth. Is there anything else you remember of the 1935 strike? You mentioned you saw the machine guns.

[00:07:20] **LES:** We moved here in October of ‘35. We went to live up in the Dunbar area of Vancouver, which is a little higher class than the working people. I’m not sure why I had to fight, whether it was the strike or my Ukrainian background. For the three months we lived up there, I had more than one fight.

[00:07:53] **HARVEY:** You did?

[00:07:53] **LES:** Yes.

[00:07:56] **HARVEY:** And you’re not sure whether it was because your dad had scabbed in ‘35, or whether it was because you were Ukrainian? Do I understand you to say that?

[00:08:03] **LES:** That’s right. Because in those days, the word “honky” indicated Ukrainian. We were honkies.

[00:08:20] **HARVEY:** Did your dad speak—well, he came here young. He spoke English, didn’t he?

[00:08:27] **LES:** Oh yes.

[00:08:27] **HARVEY:** But it didn’t matter?

[00:08:30] **LES:** I didn’t know that he had an accent until I was an adult. I heard him on the phone one day, and I realized that there was a little accent in there. But Ukrainian was not mentioned in our household. My mother insisted we were Scottish. [laughs] You know, for all those obvious reasons. Forced marriage, and it wasn’t a good one. They persevered. Oh, they fought like cats and dogs when we were kids, but they kind of mellowed as the years went by.

But, you see, my life up to that point makes a whole book in itself, I think.

[00:09:29] **HARVEY:** In what sense?

[00:09:29] **LES:** Well, in 1942 on the first of February, my buddy and I went up to City Hall, put our hands on the Bible, and swore that this was our 16th birthday. Because in Canada during the war you had to have a registration card if you were 16 and older. So we got our registered card, which means we could work legally. I put it in my wallet, and after a couple of weeks I noticed that the bend in the wallet was fraying the edge of the card. The “2” of 1942 disappeared. So I went down and I joined the Navy. They called me in and I was sworn into the Navy on March 25th, 1942.

[00:10:30] **HARVEY:** How old were you at that moment?

[00:10:31] **LES:** 15 years and 8 months. I knew that they would phone my mother, and she would be happy to get rid of me. It was one less mouth to feed.

I'd been in a week, and I get called up to the commanding officer's office. He's sitting there very grim. He looks up and he says, "How old are you, Copan?" Well, I knew that he knew. So I just said the truth, "I'll be 16 in July." "What do you think of the Navy?" I'd been in a week. "Looks good to me." "Ok, get outta here and keep your mouth shut." And so I was in the Navy. There was only one problem. I couldn't go to sea.

[00:11:28] **HARVEY:** How come?

[00:11:30] **LES:** You had to be 19 to go to sea. And even my Navy age, I was only 18. They shipped me up to Prince Rupert [Island] , and it took me about six months to figure it out. I applied for a gunner's course. Came down to Esquimalt [British Columbia] , took the course, went east with my class, and wound up on a minesweeper. Most Canadian minesweepers at that point were doing escort work. What we called the triangle run: Newfoundland, Halifax, the eastern U.S.

Some interesting things there. In September of '43, we went into Curtis Bay, which is a suburb of Baltimore, for a refit. Now, they kept six seamen and six stokers on the ship. We worked 4 on, 8 off, and 24 off. Well, in a situation like that, you can work things out. We had two days times in Washington, DC. Another time we had three days in New York City. As I say to many Americans, I say, "Did you ever walk up the steps of the Senate building? I did!"

I hooked up one night with a bunch of American sailors. Around midnight one guys says, "You know, my ambition always has been to go up the steps and knock on the door of the Senate building. I'm gonna do it right now." So we all went up and knocked on the door. Then we walked down, of course. But, we have done it.

[00:13:49] **HARVEY:** Yes, yes. What did you see on the minesweeper? What was happening on the minesweeper? Any action, activity? Junior vessels, or any of that?

[00:14:04] **LES:** By then, they were staying away from the east coast of the U.S. In early '42, it was a turkey shoot. They never thought to dim the lights of the cities. The ships were silhouetted, and the torpedoes were—But then they put blimps up, and that made a world of difference. If we were going in a convoy, the moment we crossed that line, we knew the blimps were up there. We felt different.

[00:14:44] **HARVEY:** You felt safer?

[00:14:46] **LES:** Oh, yes. We had two rescue operations. One of our stokers fell overboard. You wonder how an engine room guy can fall overboard.

[00:15:09] **HARVEY:** That's quite a trick!

[00:15:10] **LES:** What happened—there was a leak in the engine, drip, drip, drip. So they put a bucket under it. We changed watch at twelve o'clock. So the guy going off watch would take the bucket up, go back and dump it over the stern, put the empty bucket at the top of the ladder, and the guy going on watch would take it down. There isn't a hard railing around the stern of a minesweeper. There's just a post with wires. They lean them down when you're in port so they can work. Then they're supposed to put them up when you go to sea. Somebody forgot. This guy went to dump the bucket of oil, and he followed it. He came up, and he hollered.

The fellows on the bridge said that they actually heard him holler. The officer of the watch was real sharp. He immediately said, "Stop engines. Hard a port. Call the captain. Away lifeboats."

I came up. It just happened that a signalman who was closer to the boat had jumped into the lifeboat. He said, "Copan, you understand this more than I do. Get in here." He jumped out, and I got in. We couldn't find him. We could hear him. He was getting desperate, and the skipper—he gambled. He turned the searchlight on, and spotted him. We went 'round. Being the bow oar, I shipped my oar. [mimes placing an oar in rowlocks] And I reached for him. He grabbed my arm, and I'll tell you, you couldn't get tighter with a vice. But he was all slimy with oil. Fortunately, it was summer, and I was just in trousers. I was bare this [gestures to his torso], but I was smeared with oil getting him into the boat.

The other incident, when we came out of Curtis Bay, we were escorting a single tanker up to New York City. We were going to have four days in New York City. About three o'clock on Wednesday morning, I was asleep. But the bosun piped, "Away, lifeboats crew!" Well, I knew what that was. [claps] I was up there, and I jumped in the boat. There was a—the Americans called them "patrol boats." They were made, in Canada, of wood. They ran on gasoline. There was a storm building up. He ran out of gas, and the wind had taken his aials off. He was putting up flares. So we went around, and we never did put the lifeboat in the water. Skipper figured it was too rough. So we fired a line and put a tow line on him. As we were going into the mouth of the Hudson, a big Navy tug came out and took over the tow.

Instead of us getting four days, we were told to go to Halifax. One of these southern storms that build up 35, 40 foot waves. We came up to Halifax on Friday morning. We were supposed to pick up Sambro Light [Sambro Island Lighthouse], which is the guide to go into the minefield. [mimes moving around mines] We couldn't find it. We spent from 10 in the morning to 11 at night, and that storm was building. You see those pictures of 35 foot waves? I hung to a stanchion and watched them and more or less prayed, "Turn back, turn back!"

But they finally, in Halifax, decided we couldn't make it through the night. They opened the gate. You knew that there was a gate over every harbor? It turns out that's the only time the whole Second World War that the gate to Halifax was opened to let a ship in. We made history on that one.

The Germans mined the course through our minefield. The assumption is that they submarined in after a merchant ship. Then they sent in a mine-layer, and on his way out they laid 65 mines. Two ships hit mines.

Here again, we got screwed. We were in Boston. We were supposed to be there for three days. I was on the watch from midnight to 4 a.m., on deck watch. I pulled one of my little things as I tend to do. I was on watch on the ship, and the old man had to be on the shore. Along about 12:30am, I hear footsteps coming down. Here's the skipper with a girl on his arm and another couple. You pipe, "Admiral support." [holds hands up to mouth as though playing a pipe] For some reason, I walked over, and, as soon as he came aboard, I saluted and piped him aboard [laughing] And I thought, 'I'll hear about that.' Well, I did, but not in the way I expected. About 20 minutes later, the captain's steward came out. He's got a little glass like this, and he said, "The old man said not to put too much rum in it because you're still on watch, but he said, 'Give this to Copan.'"

[00:22:59] **HARVEY:** [laughs] That was a funny way to hear. Not what you expected.

[00:23:02] **LES:** Yes, and about an hour later a fueling barge came by. The officer on it hollers up, "Get your officer of the watch. You guys are sailing at 11 o'clock." I said, "We're not sailing. We're here for three days." "Get the officer of the watch." "Yes, sir!" [laughs] Turned out we were, because that's when the Germans had mined their way in, and we were one of the few minesweepers that had the minesweeping gear. That was

because the Royal Navy ordered twelve minesweepers from North Vancouver, BC [British Colombia] . When they got them, they felt they had too many, so they loaned them to the Canadian Navy. The Canadians took most of the minesweeping gear off so they could put on additional depth charges. But they couldn't touch the British ones. So we had minesweeping gear, and they said, "Get back to Halifax as quickly as you can." We were steaming at full speed.

In the dark of the night, I was on watch again. Of course, you have to be on watch to see things. But I was lookout on the starboard wing. First, I had thought I saw a spot of light on the horizon. I called the officer over. He had night glasses and he looked. Finally, he says, "You're right, but keep an eye on it." After a while I see him run over, out on the port wing. Then he hollers, "Copan, do you see anything over there?" "No, sir." Then there it was, a merchant ship travelling in the other direction, and close. We were running up the channel of a convoy.

[00:25:29] **HARVEY:** Oh, you were?

[00:25:30] **LES:** Oh, yes. A small change of course and there would have been a collision. But that's when we went into Halifax. We swept the channel. We were two weeks sweeping, and we brought up 63 mines total.

[00:25:49] **HARVEY:** You brought up almost all the German mines. How's that done? How is it actually done?

[00:25:59] **LES:** Well, you have a cigar-shaped pontoon, and it's got fins on it you can set to any depth you want. The special cable connects to the ship, and a set of shears on like that. So, you hit the chain of a mine, it runs up, and when it gets to the shears it snaps off. The mine comes to the surface. On those particular mines, they managed to take one to shore. They had an officer and a petty officer take it apart. They were each given a medal—probably the lowest award you can get—

[00:27:16] **HARVEY:** Because it was dangerous?

[00:27:19] **LES:** It was a brand new mine. Sure, trying to take a mine anytime is dangerous.

[00:27:26] **HARVEY:** Sure, sure. So they figured out what made it work.

[00:27:32] **LES:** They put it on the beach, and had these two guys go down and take it apart. Because it was so dangerous, they were awarded a Distinguished Service Medal [DSM] . I finally got it! They were awarded a DSM.

[00:27:53] **HARVEY:** Did that information allow you guys to figure out how to deactivate those mines?

[00:27:59] **LES:** No, there's only one way. You see that guy with the rifle in the movies? Ping! That's an impossibility. To hit a thing that small anywhere—but on the ship and a mine, they both are moving—we wasted 1500 rounds of ammunition to sink it. That's what you did to most mines. You shot them until they sank.

[00:28:35] **HARVEY:** They didn't explode?

[00:28:36] **LES:** No. They sank. They're still down there somewhere.

[00:28:42] **HARVEY:** [laughs] Right!

[00:28:44] **LES:** You know, they're still awarding corvettes [small warships] for sinking German submarines. Just a couple of years ago, I saw they awarded one, a corvette sank a submarine. Now, how they do it. [Grand Admiral Karl] Dönitz, the admiral of the German Navy, he had every submarine report to him once a day. He would string them out on the Atlantic miles apart. If one spotted a convoy, they wired him. He figured out where the convoy would be two days from now, ordered all his submarines to that area. Once he got them there, he told them where they should position themselves and try to sink ships.

If our Navy ship went after them with depth charges, they wired [Grand Admiral Karl] Dönitz, "I am under attack." And that's the last you've heard of them. After the war, they have gone through the millions and millions of signals until they found that one. Ok, we know that ship was sunk on such-and-such a day, at such-and-such time. Now they've got to go through all the signals on our side to find what ship was attacking at that particular time. They put them together and give the corvette credit for sinking a submarine.

[00:31:00] **HARVEY:** So it's credit that goes for deeds done way back. I see what you're saying, ok.

[00:31:06] **LES:** A couple of years ago, they awarded for sinking a submarine back in 1943.

[00:31:17] **HARVEY:** When did you get out of the Navy? What time did you get out of the Navy?

[00:31:22] **LES:** That's another story. I was on a different ship. I was on the [HMCS] Algoma, that we refitted in Liverpool, Nova Scotia. We had a big party one night. I was pissed out of my mind, make no mistake. Three of us decided that we needed some money. So we broke into a house. There was a woman there. One of those other two guys hit her. She couldn't identify them, but she was able for some reason to put a finger on me. I don't know if you were aware of the code in those days. Never rat on a friend. They wanted desperately to know who those two guys were. I wouldn't tell them. My lawyer told me straight out. He said, "Tell them who they were, and you'll get six months. If not, it'll be more." Turns out, they sentenced me to five years in the penitentiary in Dorchester. I was 17 when I went in. I didn't worry much. I did the time.

[00:33:05] **HARVEY:** You did five years?

[00:33:07] **LES:** Well, I did three years, eleven months, and seventeen days, to be exact! No, I just went on with my life after I got out. But it's a wart that there.

[00:33:26] **HARVEY:** Any particular story you remember of being in jail that illustrated what it was like?

[00:33:40] **LES:** There's a couple. I refused to work once. I had a guy bugging me all the time. He was a homosexual. I got pissed off with him. One day, it was in mid-December, and we were sitting down for smoke break. He said something, and I said, "You cocksucker!" I nailed him, and the fight was on. Of course, we got 21 days in the hole. On about the 20th of December.

To understand, you don't look out a window in a prison. There's two rows of cells like this, one opening this way, one opening this way. Then there's a good 12-15 feet, and then the outer wall of the building. There's a space between for maintenance. He was on one side; I was on the other side. There was nobody else there. Christmas Day we were approaching, and then, on Christmas Eve, the warden sent word down that they were letting us out.

[00:35:07] **HARVEY:** They let you out.

[00:35:09] **LES:** Yes!

[00:35:11] **HARVEY:** My god. When you say you went on with your life, what do you mean by that, after you got out? We're looking about in the range of 19—

[00:35:25] **LES:** '48. Well, I came home. I had a little bit of money left over from the Navy. In prison, you automatically got \$0.50 a month. If you're working, you got \$0.05 a day. It's not if you were working; it's when. Once a week, you could buy a package of tobacco and a book of papers if you need them. That was the maximum. You could have somebody on the outside send you a magazine subscription. But that was it. We got a magazine about four times a week. Then we got a novel two or three times a week.

[00:36:37] **HARVEY:** When you say work, what work did they have you doing in prison?

[00:36:44] **LES:** Course there's prison maintenance, but the first job they said to me, "You have a Grade 9 education. You'll be the bookkeeper in the tinsmith's shop." We went out to work out on the roof, and I said, "I'm the bookkeeper. I don't have to work." "No." So I got three days in the hole for that.

That's when I went to the boiler room. I was firing boilers to heat the place. That lasted quite a while. The ignorance of those people, it's terrible. This guy, he was spreading an untrue story about me. And he went to a screw—the guards are screws in the prison. Remind me later to tell you a story about that. I was told, "Don't do this, and don't do that." I said, "What the hell is going on?" One of the other guys told me. You have to come in and go down a flight of stairs to get to the boiler room. I waited there when he came back from lunch. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, I grabbed his shoulder and said, "I hear you're telling stories about me." "Yes." Boom! [laughs] He went down, and I grabbed him. I was pounding his head on the cement. I think I would have killed him if the guard—he hit me hard enough to stop me. They pulled me off of him. But then I got transferred to the stone shed.

They had trained stone cutters. One guy I know, he got out, he was offered a job with a stone cutting company. Oh, incidentally, this was in Dorchester Prison, in Dorchester, New Brunswick. They did a lot of stonework down there. He actually got a job. I got so that I could do a sill—right smooth, it has to be dead even. Then a guy came to work there. He was a cook, one of these guys doing life on the installment plan. Nobody would talk to him, for some reason, from previous experiences. But it didn't bother me. I used to talk to him. The first opportunity, they'd put him in the kitchen as the cook. A few days later, they came over and said to me, "You're going to work in the kitchen." Ok, you do what you're told. Turned out he had asked to have me as his second cook. There's three cooks: first, second, and third. First cook does the cooking; the second cook assists him; the third cook washes the pots. So, I had it real nice.

Now, do you know who [Gerneralmajor der Waffen-SS] Kurt Meyer is?

[00:41:05] **HARVEY:** No, I'm not sure who that is.

[00:41:07] **LES:** He was a German general whose troops murdered something like 20-odd Canadian soldiers. He was sentenced to hang after the war. Then they reduced that to life in prison. Then they decided that they would bring him to Canada. When we heard that he was coming to Canada, "He'll never get past the first barber shop." They used straight razors. He [the barber] said, "I'll have him!" Everybody was, "What we'll do to him when he gets here. . ." You know what they did? Nothing!

The south wing—the new wing—had five stories. The lower story, there was cells the length of it, and then there was an extension, which was the hospital. On the top floor, the extension on the end was the library. They housed him in the hospital, and he worked in the library. I was working in the kitchen. Exercise period, you go out. There was a rectangle that you could walk. Or there was a volleyball net. You could get 20 guys on each side trying to hit the ball. So I used to walk around. This Kurt Meyer—the library and the kitchen exercised at the same time. I went over and talked to him, and I got to be quite friendly with him. One day he said, “I like jam.” I said, “Well, I guess I can get you jam.” He said, “You like to read? Tell me what you like to read.” At noon, I would take a small container of jam, and I’d put it where he could reach through the bars and get it out. He came down at the end of the day from the library to the hospital, and, as he went by, he’d swap and put in reading materials for me. That went on until I got transferred out of the kitchen.

[00:44:23] **HARVEY:** That’s interesting. What did you do in 1948, when you come back here? What kind of work do you go to find?

[00:44:36] **LES:** I didn’t do anything for about a month. One day I went down and I talked with a construction company, and he said, “Come to work on Monday.” So I went home and said, “I got a job.” My younger brother was going to university, and he had taken a year off and was working in the foundry. He said, “I thought you said you were going to come to work in the foundry.” It’s closer to home and steady, so I went to work in the foundry. They made soil pipe, nothing but soil pipe fittings. I don’t know whether you’re familiar with foundry, but you have a rail line that you pull a cart load of scrap iron. You feed it into the furnace, you feed coke [coal fuel] in, somebody’s down below managing it, and they put me on that job. I’d only been there two or three weeks. The foreman came to me, and he said, “How long do you plan on staying with this job?” I’d never thought of it. I said, “Who knows? Maybe forever.” “Fine,” he said, “Come on down. The guy running,”—it’s called a cupola—“he got mad and walked out. They need somebody to run the cupola today.” I guess I did reasonably well because they put me on it steady. I became a trained cupola operator.

[00:46:44] **HARVEY:** What is a cupola?

[00:46:47] **LES:** It melts iron. It’s a tube. It must be at least ten feet in diameter. It’s lined with brick. Up here’s there’s an opening where you put in 36 inches of coke and so much iron, and then you fired it. Then you kept replacing. Down below, there’s an opening, and there’s a square box with a depression on this side and a shoot on this side. The job they gave me was to build that up in the morning. You’ve got to rebuild them every day. When the iron was hot enough—the hole is about this big—I poked the sand out of the hole, and the iron would flow. The slag would slide of this side, just onto a pile, and the iron would come up and go down into a big bucket. When they had finished for the day, the molding, they would take iron from this thing and pour the product.

[00:48:36] **HARVEY:** Did they have a union there?

[00:48:40] **LES:** Oh, yes.

[00:48:40] **HARVEY:** There was a union, ok.

[00:48:41] **LES:** International . . . It had about five or six letters in it. I forget now.

I got be pretty good at that because molten iron has a scum on it like oil, colored. After a while—you’ve got to wear goggles of course—you get so that you could know what the heat is because they can measure the heat

with this machine. Often I would read it, just with the goggles, and they would read it with the machine. I got pretty good at it.

So I was there about two years, and the collective agreement came up. Now, laboring was \$0.95 an hour. I was getting \$1.05. I said to the foreman, "Don't forget me when you're negotiating." "Well," he says, "you're not in the contract. But whatever the others get, you will get." They negotiated a nickel an hour. Today that sounds terrible! But you realize it was a little more than 5% of the [wage] .

I get my check; there's no raise on it. I said, "What happened?" Well, he says, "You're not in the contract, so you don't get it." Well, I brooded on that for a week or so. The wife and I, we were living down at Clark and Georgia, which is close to the waterfront. We used to go out in the evenings and walk down and look at the ships. We wound up in the beer brewer, had a glass of beer, went home to bed. I said to her one night, "Let's go to Toronto." She said, "Ok." After a minute, she said, "How are we going to get there?" I said, "We'll hitchhike." "Ok."

So, we got busy, put our little bit of possessions in storage, and quit our jobs. In those days, there was what was known as the Big Bend Highway [British Columbia Highway] . It was the only connection between British Columbia and Alberta by road. Are you aware of it?

[00:51:46] **HARVEY:** No.

[00:51:47] **LES:** Ok, it was on this side of the mountains. You went 150 miles north, looped through a pass and 150 miles back down, and then onto Calgary. I knew that there wouldn't be a lot of traffic, so we took a bus from here to Calgary. We hitchhiked to Toronto. There was an old road around Lake Superior in those days. So we had to go through International Falls [, Minnesota] to get into the States. In those days, you weren't allowed to take any more than \$50 cash out of the country. I'm sure the rich had accounts to take care of that problem, but us working people didn't. I had more \$50 with me. We got into Winnipeg on Saturday night late, and we stayed there Sunday. Monday morning we went to the bank. I got a—not sure what you call it—but I put our money in it. It could only be cashable in Toronto. So that we were taking less cash.

We started out of Winnipeg. The first ride was 17 miles in a Pepsi-Cola delivery [truck] . He had to turn off, so we got out of the truck. There was a little bridge over a stream, walked across the bridge, turned around, and a car came to a stop. This guy said, "Get in. Where're you going?" I said, "Toronto." "What for?" I told him. You know what a dour Scotsman is? He was personified. His wife was visiting friends in a town 40 miles from Detroit. He was the vice president of a bakery in Saint James, which is a suburb of Winnipeg. He had a brand new 1957 Chev, and he was going down to pick her up and bring her home.

When we came to lunchtime, "I'm not buying your lunch, you know." I said, "I didn't ask you. I got money, I'm fine." We went into the restaurant. He walked out. Half an hour later, he comes back in, and we get in the car, and away we go! Same thing at nighttime. Pulled into a motel. We went in; he took off. Come back the next morning. But then he was getting to understand that I wasn't leaching on him; I was only looking for a ride. We got along very well. As a matter of fact, he said to me, "You have a driver's license?" "No." "Too bad," he said, "You could have done some of the driving."

Two-and-a-half days with him, and we're 40 miles from Detroit. Lots of time, so we got into Detroit. We're looking for a hotel. You see all the big names of the big hotels, and then we say a name over here. "Let's have a

look at that.” It was a third-rate hotel, but we didn’t realize that until later. The next morning, my wife says, “I couldn’t sleep last night. Doors kept banging.” [laughs] You know what that indicated!

[00:56:43] **HARVEY:** Yes.

[00:56:46] **LES:** We had many good laughs out of that one.

[00:56:49] **HARVEY:** Now why was he going away for a half hour?

[00:56:51] **LES:** He was going to have lunch! He was going to have his lunch here, while we were having our lunch here. So there was no chance of me trying to put mine on his bill.

[00:57:05] **HARVEY:** Got it. Why were you going to Toronto? Why did you pick that?

[00:57:11] **LES:** Picked it out of the air. It was known in Canada—Toronto. Something different.

[00:57:25] **HARVEY:** What did you do in Toronto?

[00:57:30] **LES:** She was a bit of a bookkeeper. In those days you went to the unemployment church, and there was a list of jobs. You made your choice. She got one. She didn’t like it. So she quit and got another one. I took a job with the outfit that makes Red Devil Heaters. Do you have them in the States? Water heaters?

[00:57:59] **HARVEY:** We have water heaters, yes. I don’t know about Red Devil, but we have water heaters.

[00:58:08] **LES:** The first job in there I had was—they put the tank upright. They wrap the asbestos around it. Then one worker puts his arms around to hold it while the others slide. I’d go home at night, and the asbestos would stop at the belt line. Oh god, it was itchy. After about a week, I thought, ‘I gotta get out of this.’ So, I was telling the guys I was working with. Next day the foreman comes to me, and he said, “I hear you’re talking about quittin’.” I says, “Yes.” “Why?” I told him. He said, “Come with me.” He took me. You know the cast-iron burner? Each of those holes individually, they have a thing that you set it on and zzzziipp! Until it gets dull, and then you sharpen it. I stayed with that.

One day I wasn’t doing anything. They had their own foundry, a small foundry, to do their cast-iron work. So I walked in there. I was standing and watching, the foreman come over to me. He says, “What do you want?” I told him I’d been running a cupola in Vancouver. He took off his goggles and handed it to me. He said, “How hot is that iron?” So I studied it. I said, “2810.” He said, “You’re 5 degrees off. Would you like a job?” [laughs]

But the wife wasn’t having any of it. She wanted back here. I wasn’t that fussy about staying in Toronto anyway. So I didn’t take the job. We were going to go down to New York by train and then hitchhike from New York across to San Francisco and then up home. The railways in Canada went on strike so we had to take a bus. We went to New York. Hitchhiking, the first night out, we got to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Are you aware of the Pennsylvania Turnpike?

[01:01:08] **HARVEY:** Not very.

[01:01:10] **LES:** It was the first superhighway built in North America. When they built it, there was no speed limit on it. When the war came, and there was a little push on gasoline, they made the 70 mile/hour—which was tremendous in those days. So we get there, and it’s a turnpike. There’s a toll and a tollbooth, so we walk up to the tollbooth. The guy says, “Where do you think you’re going?” I said, “We’re hitchhiking.” “Not on the Pike,

you cannot hitchhike past this point. What most people do is, they walk about 100 feet back, and they get a ride before they get into the toll.” We start walking back, and screech! Breaks! A big truck and trailer stops, and we get in. We rode all night. Halfway up the toll road, there’s a huge, what do you call them? They can rest; they can go in and have a shower. A rest stop. Restaurants, everything, gas. We went in and we had a meal. We get back in the truck. His father owned the trucking company, and he had gone east to pick up a new trailer. It was empty. Before the rest area, we were passing everything on the road. Going on the other side, they were all passing us. I said, “What’s going on?” Being a trucker, of course, he laughed because he knew. Coming up the hill, he was empty. The others were loaded. Going down, it was reversed. They were just . . . ! [moves hands to show moving quickly]

There’s a town in Ohio—I can look it up on the encyclopedia—at that time, it was the only bridge in the world that had a Y. You know what I mean? You come across this way; you can go this way, or this way. He stops in town, and he says, “I can’t take you into the yard with me. Just sit down on the curb here, and I’ll be back in a while.” We sat there; we were thinking he had abandoned us. But he showed up. We went and had breakfast. He paid for our breakfast, and then he drove out onto the highway and put us off. Told us, “Go ahead.”

The second night out, we got picked up. Boy, did I learn a lot about trucking and laws. The driver can be in the cab, and, if there’s another driver, he can be in the cab. Nobody else. One driver told us he was way up in northern Michigan, and the inspector stopped him. He had his wife. “Out, right now. Leave her on the ground ‘till you can get transport for her.” That’s how bad they are. Or good, whatever.

They’d often take our bag and throw it up in the luggage compartment in the cargo. If they were stopped, “Your car broke down, and I’m taking you to the closest town.” Things like that that you’d never think of.

[01:06:50] **HARVEY:** How’d you get back out to Vancouver, to the waterfront?

[01:06:55] **LES:** I’m working on that! We got into St. Louis, and this truck driver dropped us four or five miles from the highway in the middle of a commercial area. What the hell do you do? So we walked out between two cars and put our thumb out. Pretty soon a police car stops. The cop comes back, and he said, “What are you doing?” I said, “We’re trying to hitch a ride to get back on the highway.” He said, “I hate to tell you, but you’re in the only state in the United States where hitchhiking is illegal.” Oops! So, we chatted a bit. He asked, “Are you married?” I said, “Oh, yes. Got my marriage certificate right here.” I went to open my suitcase, and he said, “Don’t bother. I’ve talked enough. I believe you.” That night I went to check; my marriage certificate was in the suitcase that we had sent on to Seattle.

But we got by. We got delayed that day. It got darker and darker. Finally, this guy that we were riding with says, “I’m going to have to turn off.” He stopped. Pitch black, you can’t see anything. He said, “About 50 feet down there, there’s a motel.” Ok, away he goes. We go down. I hammer on the door of the motel. Finally, a guy comes out. There are cabins, and that’s all they are. Just bare cabins with the toilet in the corner and the light on a string. But it’s a place to sleep. We get up in the morning. Across the street was a fancy new motel with a nice restaurant!

So, we continued. We were walking out of Amarillo, Texas on Sunday. Sunday was a lousy day for hitchhiking. I never sat down and put my thumb out. We walked, and as the traffic went by, I’d go like this. [moving thumb along] I think it was a better way of doing it. We’re walking along, and there’s a golf course on this side and bushland on this side. I see a black Pontiac coming; it stops across the other side. I says to her, “Cops.” This guy got out and came over. He says to me, “How far are you going?” I says, “As far as this road, then I’m going up 99 to Canada.” He says, “You got a driver’s license?” I says, “Yes.” He pulls out a card. He says, “Meet me in

New Mexico at this motel when you get there tonight.” He took off, heading back towards—he’d said, “It’s a pickup. It’s loaded with air conditioning. I’m taking it to Los Angeles. Normally,” he said, “my wife drives the car and I drive the pick-up. I gotta take her in because she’s sick.”

He goes. A few minutes later, this convertible, a couple in the front seat, they pull up and stop about 100 feet [ahead] . I said to Betty, “Here’s our ride.” So we run up. The back seat is loaded with luggage. They’re looking at a map. I told them my story, and he said, “Let’s have a look.” He moved some of the luggage and made a space for us. Then he took off across the desert. I swear he was doing at least 90 miles a hour. You know, you have long straight stretches.

We arrived in Albuquerque, [New Mexico] and there was the motel. So we checked into the motel. These other people are nowhere in sight yet. So we go across the street for dinner at a restaurant. This guy produced the finest pecan pie that I’ve ever had. We were chatting with him. He said, “I’ve only been here about three months. I moved from a place called New Westminster, BC.” [joking] It’s our neighbors!

The other guy showed up. He said, “At such-and-such a time, I’ll be at a service station here. Stop. We’ll fill you with gas.” Then he said, when we were on [Route] 66, he said—I think it was 39; it might have been something different. “When you get there, turn off. I’ll be waiting. I’ll see you at a service station.”

We’re driving down, and I see a sign that says Highway 36 Alternate. “Oh, I guess this is where we go.” On the far side of the valley—it’s one of the most beautiful valleys in the U.S. There’s a 40-some-odd degree grade, and I’m a new driver. I managed to stall it. In those days, you had to have three feet to start a car—one for the starter, one for the break, and one for the gas!

But I finally made it, and we went on and on. It got darker and darker. It was getting on towards midnight, and we come to a junction. Here’s this guy standing there [waves his hands] , “Where the hell have you been?” I said, “We took the highway.” “No,” he said, “you took the alternate. You should have stayed on it.” “But, anyway, we’re here.” So we got into Los Angeles and he didn’t stop. He pulled through and stopped and said, “Here you’re on Highway 99.” We hitchhiked as far as Portland. She was getting antsy. So we stayed overnight, took the bus up to Seattle, stayed overnight again, and took the train home.

[01:15:46] **HARVEY:** What did you do when you got back up here?

[01:15:52] **LES:** Well, I fiddled around. My father-in-law was trying to start a plumbing business. He was a good plumber, but he was a lousy businessman. It just didn’t work. He finally took a job in the dockyard in Victoria. I worked at several jobs. I got fired for improving on a job. Small foundry. The idiots, they were putting a thousand pounds of iron in wheelbarrow and wheeling it into the elevator. Taking it up and wheeling it over to put in the furnace. “Christ,” I said, “it’ll take him forever to get a load up there.” So I cut it to 500 pounds and moved it. “That’s not the way we do it here!” “Well,” I said, “there’s no way I’m going to try to move a thousand pounds.” So we parted company.

[01:17:03] **HARVEY:** How did you get to the waterfront?

[01:17:07] **LES:** As I told a reporter one time, I was out of work. I had three kids that needed to be fed.

[01:17:16] **HARVEY:** So this is a little while later than when you and Betty were hitchhiking, right? A few years later?

[01:17:21] **LES:** Yes, that was 1950. I finally got started in '53. But, see, you usually have to go down to the hall and hang around till all men—union, casuals—are out. Then, they called us card men. You had a card. There was a slot that you pushed them through. In theory, they would take the pile of cards, turn them upside down, and start dispatching off the top of them.

My brother married a longshoreman's daughter, so my card kept creeping up to the top. I didn't ask them to do it, but. . . . He was a Scotsman, and it was a Scottish dispatcher. I moved up fairly quickly. It took me two years to get into the union. Nowadays it takes somewhere between nine and ten.

[01:18:39] **HARVEY:** Why did you go to the waterfront? Because you knew this guy and you needed a job?

[01:18:46] **LES:** Yes! I was out of work. In those days you didn't send your resume; you walked in the door and said, "Are you hiring today?" "No." "Thank you." You went to the next one. If they were, then sometimes they'd said, "Here, fill out this application." When I went to the plywood plant, I walked in and the guy said, "Can you start at 4 o'clock today?" "No." "Tomorrow morning?" "Yes." So I went to work the next morning.

[01:19:36] **HARVEY:** Just very, very briefly, in 1950 you're hitchhiking. Where were all these children? When did these three kids come along?

[01:19:46] **LES:** The first one was born on December the 31st, '51.

[01:19:52] **HARVEY:** Then there were two more?

[01:19:54] **LES:** Three more actually. There's four years and five months between the four.

[01:20:02] **HARVEY:** Ok, so I can see where you needed a job at that point. What kind of jobs did you get? Describe the work you did. Early on there, '53, '54, '55.

[01:20:16] **LES:** I did longshore work. We did the same as any other longshoremen. Except we got more wheat jobs. They'd pour in a ship until it gets up. Then you get shovelers in, and they shovel it back. You wing it out. You shovel into the wings. That's a shitty job.

[01:20:45] **HARVEY:** How come? Why is it lousy?

[01:20:48] **LES:** It's hard work. It's dusty, and it can be dangerous. I got trapped one time. There was 17 of us. They over-poured, so there's no way they're going to get down through the main hatch. But there's a small square hatch called a safety hatch over in the wing of the ship. We shoveled until we got under it. Then we had to wait while they cleared on the deck above us. God, it got hot in there! One guy started to panic. The other guys—we were close to him—talked to him, calmed him down. But they got us out.

[01:21:44] **HARVEY:** Can you smother in there?

[01:21:46] **LES:** Oh, yes. That happens occasionally. In those days, employers didn't care. They were more likely to look after an animal than they were the human worker.

[01:22:09] **HARVEY:** Was this in Westminster?

[01:22:11] **LES:** No, Vancouver. I got into the union—I was sworn in in January '56. Once we got into the sixties, I started to get active. I've always been an unpaid business agent when I wasn't in office. And safety, I

was a nut on safety. We used to have the foremen come up from the ranks. One of them, a fellow I was friendly with, said, when he went to work for the stevedore company, they said to him, “You know all the safety rules. Don’t mention them unless the workers do. But you don’t mention them. Don’t worry about them unless the worker brings them to your attention.” In other words, let them die if necessary.

In the early to mid-sixties, I started to get active. The first time I ran for the executive—

[01:23:48] **HARVEY:** Les, before we get into that, I wrote that down. You get active in the 1960s. What about the ‘58 strike? Who do you recall from it? What did you do during that strike? What was your activity then?

[01:24:03] **LES:** Do you know where the Vancouver sugar refinery [Rogers Sugar] is?

[01:24:06] **HARVEY:** No.

[01:24:10] **LES:** It’s on the waterfront. The CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] had to circle it with their rail line when they came through because they were there before them. Another fellow and I picketed. We did six hours every second day. At first, the people in the refinery said, “Great! Go, guys!” But as it dragged on, “When are you guys going to settle this thing? We’re running short of sugar!” That’s human.

[01:25:00] **HARVEY:** What was it like picketing? You recall any stories?

[01:25:06] **LES:** Not really, not much.

[01:25:11] **HARVEY:** Why did you feel that they needed a strike at that time?

[01:25:15] **LES:** Oh, well, now you got to go to pensions. The year I started, ‘53, earlier in the year the employers finally agreed and they gave us a pension. But they controlled it; they financed it. Talk to a lot of the old timers; it was 10 cents/ton. But I’ve made enough inquiries that it was simply they put enough money in as was needed. We had no say whatsoever. The pension wasn’t all that great. It was \$60 after 30 years, something like that.

So we wanted to have a say, and that’s what we achieved. From that we set up a joint trusteeship. Do you know our trustee set up?

[01:26:29] **HARVEY:** Not as well as I should. Go ahead.

[01:26:33] **LES:** There’s three trustees from each side, and they can’t be outvoted. So, they have to compromise, and they have done very well. Because last year our fund went over a billion dollars. I understand ours is different from yours.

[01:27:06] **HARVEY:** I think it’s different, yes.

[01:27:12] **LES:** You have to cover everybody. The rule was you have to have 10 years of service before you can collect the pension. Then the government changed the rules to two years. Now we had that big area that we had to put money into. I was on the negotiating committee by then, in 1969. If we stayed with 35 years of service, nobody would have a decent pension, but with 25 years, you would get a reasonable [pension] . We put that to the members, and they accepted. As a matter of fact, I retired with 25 years of service. Then the government changed some regulations, and I wasn’t keeping up with it. We were able to go back to 35 years,

and we brought everybody up. All of us that had retired with 25 years of service, if we had worked 35, we got 35. I got that.

Then containers came along. Boston was the first one to institute the 50-mile limit. We had two years left on our pension contract when they signed on the West Coast the 50-mile [limit] . By then I was on the negotiation committee, third vice president in the area. We put the 35 year service back in, and we raised everybody. Then containers came. They put in the 50-mile limit. 50 miles, you've got to climb them [pointing out the window] first! 50 miles, you've got to cross the border first. The only way out is over water. So the only way is up the valley. What we established was anything going past Hope, [British Colombia] which is 100 miles up the valley, free and clear. Here, if you own the cargo in the container, and have a warehouse, take it there and bring it back. No problem. But, if you own half of it, and he owns half of it, you're not going to take it uptown and have \$4 minimum wage. That's our work. We were successful. It went on for a number of years.

But the shippers didn't like it for some reason. One of our contracts, Craichen [sic] , sent a guy in and told him to take that out of our contract. So he did. But he had a little [pointing to his brain] here. He said, "You take something away, you have to balance it." At that time, we were doing 270,000 cans a year. He said, "That is the maximum number. Anything beyond that is 10 cents surcharge. 25% to go to the employer only for training, 75% to go to the union to do as they wish." It wasn't long before the employers came and said, "We got a problem. We get money for training from Ottawa, and, if we take this, it's going to screw that up." It was their suggestion that they put it in with ours and use it all as a subsidiary pension. Last year we did something like 2.6 million. \$10 a head.

[01:32:50] **HARVEY:** And that all goes into the pension fund?

[01:32:55] **LES:** It's a separate pension plan. We didn't put ours out to bid, as a lot of unions do. We set up this trusteeship of three from each side. We set up an office to handle pensions and welfare benefits to be funded 50% by either side. Nothing could be taken out of pension and welfare money. Nobody's making a profit off of ours. Like I say, we hit over a billion dollars last year in the fund. They were able to give us \$10 per month per year of service.

[01:33:52] **HARVEY:** Let me roll you back a little bit. You say you started getting active in the 1960s. Why did you pick to get active? Was it safety that drove you to get active?

[01:34:07] **LES:** I've never really thought of why. Safety, plus the employers will do anything to boost production. A lot of times they do things to speed it up that aren't unsafe, but they put a strain on the workers. I think just the combination of my natural opposition to authority. I know why. My parents, both of them. I was the middle child of three boys, and they abused me both mentally and physically terribly when I look back on it.

[01:35:14] **HARVEY:** Yes, sure. And other things that came up in your life, too, probably added to it. The Navy experience and so on.

You were president of Local 501, as I recall, during 1966. Then the famous situation developed with Victoria Day. Can you fill us in on that and your experience being arrested, and all the rest of it? Might as well get to that story. Mostly your part in it.

[01:36:07] **LES:** We had an elected executive board, and most locals elected their president. I was elected as a member of the area board as well as president. The 1st of January '66 the federal government put in statutory holidays. You had to have 15 of the previous 30 days' wages from one company. Of course, most of our

members can't meet that. So they weren't getting paid for the holidays. We went to our employers, and they wouldn't help us. We went to the federal government, and they said, "Tough. That's the way the law was written."

There is a clause in the elected agreement that says there will be no strikes, lockouts, or slow-downs during the term of the agreement. That restricts you. But a holiday is yours, and Good Friday was coming up. We asked our people not to work on Good Friday. Not a thing moved. Employers were not happy with that. As we approached the Queen's Birthday in June, they went to the Supreme Court and got an injunction to tell us to go to work.

There was actually two issues here in BC. One was overall labor; they kept going and getting ex parte injunctions. You can't get public support for that. Most people say, "What the hell is an injunction?" There was also the statutory holiday thing. That, people understand. So we decided on Good Friday there would be no work, period. We knew that there would be contempt. We discussed it lengthy, and with our lawyer. He told us all the things that could happen, bad and good by not obeying the injunction. Our decision was that we would disobey the injunction, and, if they offered us a fine, we would not pay it—which meant we would go to jail. If you pay the fine, you've lost the fight.

Come Good Friday, not a thing moved. We went along to the Queen's birthday in June, and they went and got the injunction. It said, "We think the officers of the union are thinking of telling their members not to work on the holiday. If they're thinking that, they're not to do it, they're to tell their workers . . ." and all the paraphernalia that goes with it. Of course, we just ignored it. So then they started issuing—they want to see you, whatever you call that. We were dodging them because we still had work to do! There were so many interesting things. My two boys were delivering the morning newspaper at that time. The sheriff that they put on to deliver the notice to me lived in the next block. Every morning he was out there about 4:30am, sitting in his car in front of my garage. Of course, my boys would come in and say, "Mr. McKay is sitting out back." Fine, I'd phone a friend and he'd come to the front and pick me up and away we'd go. To show you how petty some people can be, I had a daughter in Grade 1 at that time, and he had a daughter in Grade 1. They were the best of friends because they're blocks apart. He forbid her to play with my daughter because of the dispute. Christ! Six-year-olds!

[01:42:20] **HARVEY:** Very petty, yes.

[01:42:23] **LES:** Of course, eventually, we decided it's time so we phoned them one morning and said, "We'll be down to the courthouse en masse at 10 o'clock to turn ourselves in." We went, and then they issued notices and told us to go to court. We went through all of that. That's what we went through.

The first day, actually, when we came out of court, our lawyer was there with a law book. I think I mentioned the requirements in the book. The delay was so much that finally he went up to the judge's office to see what was going on. He came back, laughing again. He said, "There are seven lawyers in there trying to get the judge to change it to criminal contempt." But, remember what he said: "I no longer have jurisdiction." Couldn't do it. They finally took us to the city jail on Friday night. I can tell you the food there isn't fit to eat. Saturday morning, they took us to Oakalla, which is the provincial prison. The change room and the laundry are one huge, huge room. They drive the van right in, take the prisoners out of the van inside. Across one wall there was a big banner that said, "Oakalla Laundry Workers Local 1 Welcomes ILWU."

[01:44:29] **HARVEY:** Really! That's wonderful! I never heard that.

[01:44:37] **LES:** The guards are mostly only people. They were getting a big kick out of this because we're defying authority. That's what most prisoners are in for, defying authority in one way or another. You break into a house, you're . . . Then Roy Smith, the president of the Canadian area [ILWU Local 501 president] , he weighed about 300 pounds. They couldn't find a shirt to fit him there. They had to go out and buy a shirt for him.

Wherever we went in the prison, we were treated differently from the prisoners. One guard said to me, "In all the years I've been here, I've never seen more than one prisoner talk with his lawyer at any time. There's two of you guys in there talking with him." We had a full-scale board meeting in the dining room. Our people from outside came in. That's when they came to us and asked us if we would go up to the Chilliwack River [the Vedder River] . They did a selling job—it was so much better because you were in a cabin. More freedom to move about.

We agreed, but Roy laid down the conditions. All ten of us would be in one camp. We could meet at any time. We could meet with our people from outside in the evening any night they wanted to come up. There would be a telephone available to us for union business. He emphasized that there would be no social calls on that; it would be strictly union business. They agreed, mostly I think to get us out of their hair. We went up there, and we counted heads, and there was only eight of us. "Where's the other two?" "Oh, they're in the camp up the river." Roy, you can imagine, 300 pounds, sits down and says, "We will do this." Or else was implied. So they said, "Ok, we'll go up there in the morning and bring them back." They gave all eight of us a bus ride up to the next camp, and we picked up our friends and came back. They were right in that you have a lot more freedom there. We went in there, and the sporting equipment they had was terrible. We told our people what we wanted. They went out and spent over \$100—remember this was 1966!—on sporting goods. We resupplied the prison.

When you're restricted to how much tobacco and so on that you can have, when you're moving they put all of your possessions in one bag. We're up there, and they would call us in one by one. This guard had your bag. He took my bag and he dumped it out, and he says, "That's. . ."—staring at it! There was a half a pound of tobacco, four or five packs of tobacco, three or four books of papers, a deck of cards, and a crib [cribbage] board, and a few other things. He sat and looked at it, and he said, "What am I gonna do with this? Here, you're not supposed to have it, but take it anyway." He pushed it across the desk. Of course, I spread that amongst; we all did.

[01:50:14] **HARVEY:** Besides getting you guys out of their hair, why else were they willing to give into your demands? The guards and the prison system and so on. Is there another reason that they were willing to give in to what you guys asked for, what Smith asked for?

[01:50:30] **LES:** They could not order us to do anything. They could ask us if we would do it. They came to us and said, "Would you guys consider going up to the camp on the river?" And then they gave us a selling job as to all the good points.

[01:50:51] **HARVEY:** Why were they treating you relatively well? Were they afraid of public opinion? What were they afraid of?

[01:50:59] **LES:** No, they were afraid of the other convicts. The federal prison was in New Westminster, and they rioted in there. They put holes through cement walls that thick—that a man can walk through. Now, how in the hell can they do that? They tore all the plumbing out. Government gave in; they built another prison. When they closed this one, I gave tours. So I went out with Ivy, and, while we were going through there, they have a library. They have a section wired off with the legal books in it. Ivy and I were standing and looking at that, and

I said to her, “It was never like that when I was in.” We went outside, and she said, “I gotta rest for a minute.” So we sat down on a low stone wall. This guy come over and he says to me, “I overheard you say that you were in there.” So I have to explain, “No, I was in Dorchester.” Suddenly he says to me, “You’re Les Copan.” “Yes.” He said he was a writer, writing for The Prophet [Latter Day Saints newspaper] . He’s a real good writer. I liked his stuff. His son was a coin collector, and he used to bring his son to the coin club meetings. That’s where he [recognized] me from.

[01:53:24] **HARVEY:** When you’re there with Ivy, this is later than ‘66. Am I right about that?

[01:53:30] **LES:** Oh yes, that was when they closed the prison.

[01:53:36] **HARVEY:** So that was way later?

[01:53:37] **LES:** Oh yes. I’d have to look up the date on that. They let us out in ‘66 after three weeks. The Minister of Labor came out here and he made us an offer. They kept their word. They put an act through. Not only me but anybody who worked for multiple employers are covered.

Incidentally, a graduate student at Simon Fraser [University] did his thesis on that incident, and it’s 32 pages. His conclusion was that we were not only good for the longshoremen; it’s good for anybody in Canada. You haven’t seen that?

[01:54:58] **HARVEY:** No, but this is also part of the Pensioners’ Association Oral History project to get your story down.

[01:55:09] **LES:** This is, but that wasn’t. He was a graduate student. A great deal of the information that he used came from me. Are you going to be in town tomorrow?

[01:55:32] **HARVEY:** Yes.

[01:55:33] **LES:** See if we can get the secretary to bring you a copy.

[01:55:39] **HARVEY:** You have copies at the local?

[01:55:41] **LES:** They have it on a disk. They get it every time I ask.

[01:55:48] **HARVEY:** Oh, ok. We’ll put it in with the record where are the Pensioner Club materials are being archived.

[01:56:25] **LES:** [Making notes on a notepad.] With this one eye, I’ve got macular degeneration. On top of that, I’ve got a massive cataract. It’s going to come off soon now. We put it off because of . . .

[01:57:09] **HARVEY:** Les, what other big issues did you get involved in when you were active in the union? What other major things have we missed, in terms of your experience inside the longshore union? Have we missed any major issues?

[01:57:29] **LES:** A lot of small stuff. The employers had an iron hand here until the mid-forties when the ILWU came in. They did everything they could to keep us from getting in the union. They spent a lot of money on anti-union propaganda. Nothing major, a lot of small stuff.

[01:58:28] **HARVEY:** Well, you covered pensions, containerization, the Victoria Day situation. I'm just looking for any major thing we missed. Not so much the small stuff, although that can be illustrative.

[01:58:44] **LES:** A lot of the small stuff, but, offhand, a major issue, I can't really think of anything.

[01:58:57] **HARVEY:** When did you retire?

[01:58:59] **LES:** '88. 26 years. As a matter of fact, September 30th. Nowadays, they would put down the guy retired October 1st. We have a man that interviews anybody that's retiring. I went in, and I said, "I'm gonna retire on the first of October." He said, "No, you're not. If you retire on the first of the October, you have worked one day that month. You don't get a pension check. But if you retired on September 30, you get your October pension payment." Whether they have changed it, I don't know. They keep putting down October 1st.

[02:00:13] **HARVEY:** Let me ask you another question. How active have you been in the Pensioners' Association? Have you come to the meetings a lot? Can you talk about that a little bit, what it's meant to you? Why are you here now, today?

[02:00:31] **LES:** Because I'm still a longshoreman, and I believe in unionism. I've had some real vicious arguments. My grandson and my daughter in Alberta don't seem to be talking to me very often because I'm opposed to the [Keystone] Pipeline.

But, union-wise, the big thing is getting sworn in. I guess maybe it still is; the casual finally get sworn in. I had the privilege of swearing my son into the local in Vancouver. But you see, those are the small stuff we're talking about it.

[02:01:31] **HARVEY:** But that's kind of good to know, that you swore your son in, that your son is in the local.

[02:01:40] **LES:** I'm the guy who speaks up. I guess you would call it a sidewinder's compliment. One of our guys who was on the executive when I wasn't, he came to me. He named a person on the other side and said, "We don't trust that president of the local at the moment, but that Les Copan, we know that his word is good."

Training became a big issue with me. They would send somebody to teach you how to drive a winch, but, when it came to the railway, they sent you over two weeks. It was up to the guys who were working there to show you what you had to do. They started two week periods for the engineers. Guy by the name of Joe LeBrun; he's a Maltese [from Malta]. He died earlier this year, and he hated the British. He was a loose cannon. He applied for engineer training. He got his switch ticket. And they wouldn't train him. They weren't training. This went on for the longest time. Finally, it clicked with me. I went to the business agent that handled that, and I said, "Look, I have more seniority than Joe." I also had a switching rating. I said, "Put my name down for engineer training. If they accept me, it's an indication that they're holding Joe back so they'll have to train him. But tell them that I will guarantee that Joe will never pass the test." He went in, sure enough; next week I was over there training.

Air on a locomotive is very important. I had a guy showing me all the first week. I said to him, "How do we work the air?" He said, "We'll look at that next week." So I come in on Monday morning, "Where's Joe?"—this guy was also named Joe—"He's on holiday. He started his vacation time today." He had no idea how to use the air. I then had to learn by trial and error.

At the potash dock, you'll get usually 86 cars of potash [potassium fertilizer]. You're supposed to put one in the dumper; they dump it; you move over and put the next one in. But the guys don't like that. You come in slowly,

and they start opening up. By the time they get to the other end, the car is empty. Of course, you've got to bring that in on the air brake. I was forever dynamiting it. That's when you pull the lever, and every brake on the train snaps into place. I'd get sworn at quite a bit, but eventually I learned.

[02:06:26] **HARVEY:** Now, this is part of longshore jurisdiction? I'm not familiar with moving an engine as part of longshore jurisdiction.

[02:06:34] **LES:** Oh yes.

[02:06:36] **HARVEY:** Up here it is?

[02:06:37] **LES:** Vancouver Wharves, Neptune Terminals, the chip dock, and Port Moody are 500's jurisdiction. Westminster have a couple of places over there that they have jurisdiction of.

[02:07:06] **HARVEY:** Moving these trains up to the dock to be unloaded?

[02:07:11] **LES:** Vancouver Wharves, to get the rails in there, the CN [Canadian National Railway], what they do is they bring them up and they push them so they're just in. Our lokie [locomotive?] can go out on their track, come down, then push them in.

Now, remember, I'm talking 25 years ago. At Neptune, they left the lokie hooked on to it, and they hooked onto the other end. We towed their engine in with the loads, so that when it's empty we could push it out to where the CN was legally. . .

[02:08:31] **HARVEY:** That's interesting. That's a little different.

[02:08:39] **LES:** North shore, a lot of it is Indian land, reserved land. Vancouver Wharves is split. This side is reserved; this side is not. Reserved people don't pay tax. The dude's in there; he drives through the engine tariff and then onto the Indian territory. They work out an average, and they have a formula that they use so that they're not charging the Indian tax.

[02:09:31] **HARVEY:** Anything we've forgotten? I think we've kind of covered what we needed to cover. You want to add anything at all?

[02:09:41] **LES:** Well, in safety, when you're working in the yard, there's an engineer, a man that rides the front of the lokie, a man on the ground, and another man—we call him the head man. You maybe have 15 cars. He goes to the other end, and he signals what you want done at that end.

We finally got rid of the red lantern; now we have a radio. When you're dumping sulfur, you push a car in. Switchman goes over and pulls the pin and backs him out. The dumper turns upside down and dumps the sulfur. You bring him up, but you close the knuckle so that, when the locomotive comes up, he just pushes against the car. He doesn't hook onto him. It goes out the other side of the dumper, goes down, up, and then back down on another track.

They started giving the foreman a little radio that he pinned on here, and he could send and receive. I kept after them at the Wharves. "Why don't you give them to the switchmen?" "Oh, they're special for the foremen." Until the day that one of our guys was running to jump up on the car, and he dropped his radio. He jumped on a moving car, and he went with it. Pushed one car through. It went through and up. The engine kept pushing the

next car; it went through and tore everything all to hell. Surprisingly, the next week all the switchmen had little radios.

[02:12:27] **HARVEY:** Did he die? Was he killed?

[02:12:30] **LES:** No, he got off before they got that kind of stuff.

At Neptune, they run the dumper car in, and there's four gates underneath the car that they open, and the potash pours out. But the shed is so narrow that there's a sign up, "Do not ride a car in here." One of our guys, whether he forgot or not, he tried to go through. It just rolled him. Amazingly, he didn't die, and amazingly, he's as able and active today as he ever was. I have lunch with him once a month.

[02:13:40] **HARVEY:** He's lucky.

[02:13:42] **LES:** It's not only us. This side of the harbor, it's the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railroad] . Now they have to push cars in to load them from the ship and to the ship, for our people to move. They may push 20 cars in. Then the head man has to walk all the way back to the locomotive, and they get lazy. So what they did at Centennial, they tied a ribbon on the fence here so the locomotive when he saw that, he knew he was in there.

Was I president or was I just working there? Anyway, one night, the foreman came down to the ship that was berthed there, and he parked on the rail tracks—which is a very common practice. There was cars there so he stopped at these cars, got up, and walked aboard the ship. The train came in. His car was between the rail cars and the parked rail cars. I'm telling you, it was about that long! I went down in the morning and looked at it, and I filed a complaint. It doesn't do any good. The greatest offenders are our own people. [laughs] I don't tell them that! I don't mind arguing with the company, but I hate arguing with my own people.

[02:16:07] **HARVEY:** Well, I think we kind of got it. We much appreciate all the time you—

[02:16:14] **LES:** Probably a little more than you expected!

[02:16:18] **HARVEY:** Little bit, but it's ok. We got a lot of good stuff.

[02:16:21] **LES:** It's only ten to four.

[02:16:21] **HARVEY:** Yes, they're having their event at five o'clock, so we should probably get ready for that.

[02:16:24] **LES:** Wash my face.

[02:16:24] **HARVEY:** Much appreciated!